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Trinity C
Peace, Seattle
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Psalm 8

OPENING THE DOOR TO WONDER

The conversation started in the car while I was bringing Kai to school Friday morning.
We'd just confirmed our after school plans, which included making popcorn—a Friday night staple in the Kindem home—when out popped the question:

DAD, WHERE DO SEEDS COME FROM?

Figuring the topic was popcorn, I answered Kai's question by talking about how each plant has it's own way of producing seeds and sending them out into the world…corn seeds and dandelions and pine cones and apple seeds.

YEAH, he said when my explanation had run its course, BUT WHERE DO THEY COME FROM?
And it dawned on me that the topic had shifted; that what had begun as a HOW DOES THIS WORK kind of question had become an inquiry into the origin of life itself, and the mystery of it all.

There's been plenty of ink spilled on the subject of the Holy Trinity—and the mystery of how God can be One and Three at the same time—but we're not going to go there today.

Instead we're going where our Psalm invites us: to a place not so much of explanation but rather of WONDER.

> *When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,*
> *the moon and the stars that you have established;*
> *what are human beings that you are mindful of them,*
> *mortals that you care for them? – Psalm 8:3-4*

DO YOU HEAR THE WONDER IN THE QUESTION?
The notes of gratitude, awe, and plea all rolled into one?
The query which is actually an answer?—and an invitation to marvel at the vastness of this world in which we find ourselves, a world we had no part at all in creating but which nonetheless provides everything that is needed without our asking?

"God is so great, and we are so small," notes James McIntyre, "Yet God chooses to be known. God chooses a relationship with us that goes on and on and on. WHY?"

"Why does God continually choose to love us, knowing who we are, knowing the smallness of our minds? Do we really need an answer? Or is it enough to respond, "THANK YOU," "WOW," and "HELP ME!"?[1] [Feast, James McIntyre. 34]

Psalm 8 opens a door to the contemplation of mystery and invites us through it.

What do I mean? Better, perhaps, to start with what I DON'T mean.

[1] James McIntyre in *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol. 4, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010) p.34.

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- I don't mean that we should check our minds at the door and simply use mystery as an "ace in the hole" when our observations or experiences of the world or of God don't add up.
- I don't mean that we should "dumb our conversation down" to avoid asking the deeper questions about the existence of God and this world, questions that can keep us up at night and may even serve as barrier between our faith life and the rest of our life.
- Nor do I mean that we should ignore all the rich insights that the sciences can and do provide for us about how the natural world works.

To enter into the contemplation of mystery is simply to stand in the place of the psalmist as she wonders aloud how it is that the God who created the heavens and set the stars in their courses could have any regard for mere human beings at all.[2]

> *"When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?"*

"Confronted with the vastness of the night sky," writes Kathryn Schifferdecker, "the psalmist knows his or her own insignificance. How much more should we wonder at our place in the world, we who have delved into some of the mysteries of that sky?"

"The magnitude of the Milky Way galaxy, let alone the universe, boggles the mind. To take one small example, if we were to scale down the size of the Solar System so that the Sun was the size of a tennis ball, the Earth would be the size of a grain of sand about 27 feet away. And the next nearest star to the Sun would be [about the distance from here to Denver, Colorado] over 1400 *miles* away! Our home galaxy, the Milky Way is itself 100,000 light years across, and is only one of hundreds of billions of galaxies, each containing billions of stars!"[3]

The psalmist in his day new nothing of this vastness except what he grasped intuitively.
If anything, in our age, with our knowledge, the question of the psalmist has grown even more profound. The scale is beyond our ken, and finding the language to describe it moves us closer to the realm of art than of cold, hard science.

In her book, AMAZING GRACE: A VOCABULARY OF FAITH, Kathleen Norris writes:

> "Albert Einstein, in considering both art and science as a form of wonder, questioning, and contemplation, once said: 'If we trace out what we behold and experience through the language of logic, we are doing science; if we show it in forms whose interrelationships are not accessible to our conscious thought but are instinctively recognized as meaningful, we are doing art. Common to both is the devotion to something beyond the personal, removed from the arbitrary.' Both science and poetry reveal the mysterious connections that undergird our lives, and the religious sensibility knows it as truth."
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> "Thus," continues Norris, "Rachel Carson tells us in The Sea Around Us that "each of us carries in our veins a salty stream in which the elements sodium, potassium, and calcium are combined in almost the same proportions as sea water."[4]

Author Annie Dillard takes us further into wonder as she stares through a microscope into the heart of a single cell of an elodea algae plant:

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[2] Kathryn Schifferdecker at: http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?tab=1
[3] Ibid.
[4] Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith.* Riverhead Books: New York, 1998, p. 288.

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> "If you analyze a molecule of chlorophyll, [the element that gives the green world of plants its color and carries out the business of photosynthesis]," Dillard writes, "what you get is 136 atoms of hydrogen, carbon, oxygen and nitrogen arranged in an exact and complex relationship around a central ring. At the ring's center is a single atom of magnesium. Now: If you remove the atom of magnesium and in its exact place put an atom of iron, you get a molecule of hemoglobin. The iron atom combines with all the other atoms to make red blood."[5]

OH LORD, OUR LORD, HOW MAJESTIC IS YOUR NAME IN ALL THE EARTH!

Tertullian, the 2nd & 3rd century Church Father who added the word "TRINITY" to Christian theological vocabulary, contributed his own earthy analogy of the Trinity as a plant, with the Father as a deep root, the Son as the shoot that breaks forth into the world, the Spirit as that which spreads beauty and fragrance, "Fructifying the world with flower and fruit."[6]

Neither Tertullian nor the psalmist had microscopes, but had they, I suspect their deep pondering would have led to the same sense of wonder and to much the same question: Why care for us, God? Why stoop so low in order to become accessible to us—seeable, knowable, relatable to us?

The rest of Psalm 8 tries to get a handle on these questions by pointing to humanity's first vocation: to care for everything under heaven. To be, in the words of Genesis (2:15) earthkeepers.

"The faithful response to God's grace in honoring humankind with such responsibility is not HUBRIS—"It's ours to do with as we wish"—but HUMILITY—"How amazing that we are entrusted with such gifts!"[7]

But in his book, THE DREAM OF THE EARTH, Thomas Berry writes:

> We have lost our sense of courtesy toward the earth and its inhabitants, our sense of gratitude, our willingness to recognize the sacred character of habitat, our capacity for the awesome, for the numinous quality of earthy reality.[8]

What we need, Berry says, is a new cosmology that will allow us to regain what we have lost.

Over the next month of our worship life, beginning next Sunday, we begin a Season of Creation[9] in which, we hope, humility will replace hubris, and we will rediscover once more the gratitude, awe, and yearning for wholeness that is distilled so powerfully in the poetry the psalmist shares.

As with all journeys in the spirit, it begins and ends, like our psalm, with doxology.

OH LORD, OUR LORD, HOW MAJESTIC IS YOUR NAME IN ALL THE EARTH!

Amen.

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[5] Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek.* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), pp. 126-127.
[6] Norris, op cit. p. 291.
[7] James Gertmenian in *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol. 4, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010), p.37.
[8] Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth.* San Francisco: Sierra Club, 1988, p. 2.
[9] For more information on the origin of Season of Creation and freely available resources, go to: www.seasonofcreation.org.